

# A father's explanation clarifies risk in the workplace

I was born and raised on the north coast of California in a logging community. My family has been logging redwood trees in that area for four generations. My grandfather was killed in a logging accident in 1952.

During my youth, I attended a number of funerals for neighbors and fathers of schoolmates. These deaths were the result of logging accidents.

Being young and not understanding, I asked my father, who spent nearly all of his adult life felling redwood trees, why so many people were killed each year. It has been more than 40 years since I asked that question. My father's response has echoed in my memory ever since. His explanation is as applicable today as it was that day so many years ago:

"Well son," he said while scratching his chin, "when you first start working in the woods, you learn how to do things safely. Then the day comes when you find yourself in a pickle and you have to take a shortcut.

"You know full well that what you're doing is risky so you make sure you do it real careful. Everything goes well and you get away with it."

At this point, I remember he paused, looked at the ground and kicked the soft dirt gently with the toe of his work boot. Then, after a long, thoughtful moment, he continued, "The problem is that the need to take the shortcut will come up again and again. Each time, you accept the risk a little quicker and soon forget that you are both taking a shortcut and accepting the risk that goes with it."

**Commentary  
by**

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That one explanation, coupled with attending all those funerals, accomplished more for developing my understanding of risk in the workplace than all of the safety slogans and safety placards I have been subjected to in 38 years of experience in heavy industry.

I hope this little recount of a brief moment in my childhood does the same for you. ■

**Wallace's grandfather,  
left, and father in 1949.**